

Mr. John Hendren from ABC News interviews Commanding General Raymond T. Odierno, Multi-National Force – Iraq

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MR HENDREN: When Secretary Gates came here when you were formally installed in this position, he said that your mission was dramatically different than the mission that General Petraeus was given. Can you describe for me what is that mission and how is it different?

GEN ODIERNO: Sure. Well, first, I think it was definitely about establishing security. Clearly, there was not security here; we had to establish security. And so we did that. As now we come back here at the end of '08, it's more about what I call "Helping Iraq achieve its full sovereignty." So it's now more about allowing them to achieve their full sovereignty so they can move forward, they can move from a fragile state to a stable state. So that, obviously, is a very different problem set. In addition, it will be under a different environment. Hopefully it will be under an environment where we have a strategic agreement with the Government of Iraq.

MR HENDREN: What makes Iraq a fragile state? I hate to use that phrase, but...

GEN ODIERNO: Well, it's definitely ... There's three things that mostly I talk about. One is the capacity of the Iraqi Security Forces to sustain operations against threats such as al-Qaida, Iranian-supported special groups and other external and internal problems. Secondly, it's about them being able to deliver to the people the services that they need. If they're not able to do this, you don't know what it can cause the population [unintelligible – background noise]. Third is unified vision of the leaders of the Government of Iraq. Unified vision to solve the tough problems such as disputed territories ... [unintelligible] so you don't see them working together [unintelligible].

MR HENDREN: Among those issues, you've got the Sons of Iraq situation, which is potentially explosive. We interviewed some of these guys near where you used to work in Salah ad Din Province and they told us outright that if these guys are not getting jobs, that they probably will go back to work for the insurgents.

GEN ODIERNO: Well, again, I think, first off, the government is acting in good faith [unintelligible], starting in Baghdad, the transition in Baghdad. As

of today we've transitioned about 51,000 to the government. I think they have a very good program in place to pay them, to hire about 20% or so into the security forces, and then attempt to develop private as well as governmental employment. We have an agreement with them. We're working very closely with them. It's going to be...it's not going to be an easy problem, but we believe the best monitoring [unintelligible]. And I think we'll take our time moving out of Baghdad. We'll get Baghdad solved, and then we'll move north and south to deal with the Sons of Iraq up there as time goes on. It's something that we'll watch very closely.

MR HENDREN: You've talked about Sunni and Shiite SOI [unintelligible]. They're distrustful of the government. Do you foresee that going well?

GEN ODIERNO: I think it's confidence building. I think the government was mistrustful of SOIs for a long time and I think they've accepted them, having watched them now in the last 18 months, what they've been able to do. And so I think it's the same thing with the SOIs. They're...you know it's kind of the fear of the unknown. Are they really going to take care of us? Are they not going to take care of us? The coalition force will have to be here to monitor that to make sure it does and provide that [unintelligible] confidence to the SOIs. So we kind of become an intermediary between the government and

the SOIs. So it's very important that we maintain that role.

MR HENDREN: In a broader sense, how do you define victory anymore?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, again, I think, you know, victory is kind of a loose term. I think success over here is that we have a Government of Iraq that is able to first, elected by the citizens of Iraq. They're able to provide the necessary services and other things needed by the people of Iraq. They are...have a strategic relationship with the United States. They will assist us in fighting the war on terrorism, and be a regional stabilizing factor here in the Middle East.

MR HENDREN: What are the things that make you—in coming back here, I know you were only gone for six months—what are the things that make you most hopeful about Iraq?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I think it's the...what I see is, first, Iraq has rejected al-Qaida. They've generally rejected al-Qaida. And that's a key piece. If the population rejects those forces that are trying to create instability, that provides hope. I also am starting to see them reject other malign external influences. I think that's extremely important. The other hopeful thing is we are seeing some signs of normality. We are seeing Iraqis realizing they now have hope and they believe they

can move forward to the future.

But we still have problems. We still have to get displaced people back. We have to get some of those individuals that have been educated to come back here and help rebuild Iraq, and that's going to take some time.

MR HENDREN: What are the ... those problems that you see in terms of seriousness? In terms of Iraq, you've got refugees. What of those could really threaten to unravel progress here?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, again, I think there's a couple of things. It is losing the confidence of the population, frankly, is the biggest threat. And you can do that by a variety of ways: Sons of Iraq. Not delivering the services that the people need. People becoming disenchanted with how the government is dealing with the problems and then they would go back to violence, create instability. I think those are the biggest threats for the future.

MR HENDREN: The government has taken a long time to make some political progress. They've just gotten the provincial election law. That's next year, not this year. Are you frustrated with the pace of the political process?

GEN ODIERNO: Not really. I would just say what's encouraging is the fact they are using the political process. These are very difficult issues. The fact that they have passed the provincial election law—the election probably will occur on the 31st of January. That's an extremely positive step. So although we would have liked to have had it in 2008, it's very early in 2009. It will allow the people to elect those that are representative of them which was not always the case after the 2005 elections. We believe everybody will participate. We believe that, in itself, will improve the stability over time.

MR HENDREN: So it's not what you hoped for, but you're satisfied.

GEN ODIERNO: I am. I am satisfied. Now, we still need to make more progress. We need an oil law. You know, obviously we're going to go through this strategic agreement in the Council of Representatives so there's still quite a bit more work that'll have to be done. But I am encouraged. They passed over 20 laws, so they've not been stagnant. They have been [unintelligible].

MR HENDREN: What's your single greatest concern?

GEN ODIERNO: Again, I think it's our ability to get a strategic agreement with the

Government of Iraq, then being able to implement that agreement, and then sustain the progress that we've already made while then the Government of Iraq will be able then to build their capacity. That's my biggest concern.

MR HENDREN: This will be the first election in which people will be voted out as well as voted in an elections year that has been characterized by violence in the past. Do you think there will be significant violence?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, there's two things we're watching for very carefully. One is we're going to have open list so people will know who's running. Will there be any assassinations or attempts by others to try to influence the election? And secondly, we'll watch very closely about the first 90 days or so after the elections to see if there's any retaliation or people who choose to go to violence instead of use peaceful means. We've been encouraged at the fact that the Iraqis so far have used politics to try to solve their problems for the most part. We hope that continues after the elections.

MR HENDREN: Do you have that history, and then lately we've had sticky bombs, I guess, a new threat. Are you expecting things to accelerate a little bit?

GEN ODIERNO: Again, that's something we're going to watch for. We'll watch very carefully and we'll make sure that we try to, obviously, limit that as time goes on.

MR HENDREN: You're going to have to be working for a new commander-in-chief at the beginning of the year. I'm not going to ask you to pick, but how do you prepare to work for a new commander-in-chief?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, what my job as the commander over here is first off, you're given a mission. So up through my chain of command – through CENTCOM, secretary of defense – I will provide my assessment. And what I'll do is I'll tell them, "This is what our mission is, this is how I think the way forward is, here are the risks involved with this, and here's my recommendation." And then that will be presented to whoever the new commander-in-chief is, and then we'll go from there. You know that's how our system works. I think that's what makes our system so strong.

MR HENDREN: What do you do if whoever is commander-in-chief has a dramatically different view of what that ought to be?

GEN ODIERNO: Then I take the mission that he's given us and we, again, we do a mission assessment, provide...and this is how we think we'll

execute what you told us. Here are the risks involved and here's our recommendations, and then we move forward.

MR HENDREN: Speaking of that recommendation, you'll be making another one sometime after the inauguration of the new president.

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I think what we'll do is obviously during that time, we'll have discussions and probably sometime after my guess is we'll make some new recommendations.

MR HENDREN: Can you give us any insight on that? I'm not asking you to predict it, but based on the way things are going now.

GEN ODIERNO: Well, what I would say is...what I would say is there's a couple of things. First, we've got to see what the new strategic agreement is. That will impact the recommendations. So we have to see how that turns out and how we implement that. The second thing is we continue to see progress. Obviously we will...based on conditions, we'll make recommendations accordingly.

MR HENDREN: And you've said that we've learned from our mistakes in the past. What are those mistakes?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I would say that number one is really it's about understanding this problem as an entire environment. It's understanding socio-economic, the tribal, the cultural, the...how they interrelate to each other. And then how do we change our tactics, techniques, and procedures to then have the best effect on this environment? That's what we want. Everybody has learned. And it changes so much and we've learned so much. We have experts now, people who've been involved in this for so long. We feel much more comfortable in solving some of these problems and it's made us more effective.

MR HENDREN: And does that apply to you as well in your...?

GEN ODIERNO: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean every...[unintelligible] learn every day. And I think the bottom line is you have to study, you have to learn, you have to understand, you have to talk to people, you have to listen. And you learn and you work your way through this. None of us are all-knowing. We learn every single day. So I've learned an awful lot since I've started this mission.

MR HENDREN: What do you think about your criticism that your guys [unintelligible] were extra tough.

GEN ODIERNO: I would just say the area we were in was the heart of Saddam

Hussein's support, and it was a tough area. I would say that I think it's a bit overblown. I would say we did what we thought balanced that lethal and non-lethal action to be successful. I thought we were pretty successful at the time. Have we learned? Yes. I just walked through what we've learned. We've definitely learned since that time.

MR HENDREN: [Unintelligible].

GEN ODIERNO: I don't. I mean I think we did several things. We captured Saddam Hussein. We captured several of the top-tier individuals. When we left, violence in that area was as low as it's ever been, and we've maintained that since we left. So there's some positive things to what we did.

MR HENDREN: By the way, [unintelligible] at the time it happened, I was on the tarmac in London when you caught Saddam. Bad choice for a time to go home. How has the war changed the Army? You talk about the lessons, but the role of the Army has changed its structure.

GEN ODIERNO: Yeah, well, first of all, we have learned to understand what the requirements are during a persistent conflict. This is by far, since I've been in the service—I came in just right after Vietnam—the

first time we've been in a sustained, persistent conflict. And it's the first time we've been in a sustained, persistent conflict with an all-volunteer force. So there's been a learning along those lines – what it takes to maintain our force, to continue to recruit or force, and still be able to execute our mission.

Besides that, we've had to become more full spectrum. You know, back in the '90s and even in early turn of the century, we were focused on high-end operations. We are now very clearly understanding asymmetric warfare, how that plays in the war. How we do counterinsurgency. We've become much more [unintelligible] to be able to make our Army much more adaptive than we were before. We've had to change our whole system. We've had to change our system of how we train our officers, how we train our noncommissioned officers, how we train our [unintelligible].

MR HENDREN: Americans...you've just been back home and you've surely seen this on television and elsewhere. Americans are largely tuning out to the war here. Why is that happening? And does it bother you?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I mean I think, first of all, I think it's happening...it's starting to happen because the coverage is a bit less than it was. And I think

actually that's a positive thing because I think we are starting to move forward in a positive manner here. I think people understand that. They hear it; they're not quite sure why it's happening. It is important, though, that people do understand that this is an important region. And it's not about oil, it's about stability. It's about security and stability, and in order for us to maintain that for a long time to come. And for us to have long-term security relationships here, for us to have a nation that's in the middle of the Middle East be more stable than it ever has been I think will contribute tremendously to our future security.

MR HENDREN: Is it dangerous for the American public to tune out a place where there has been so much commitment and where people like you and your own family have made such sacrifices?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I think it's important that the United States people should understand. Obviously a lot of our resources are up here both monetary, but most important, the resource of our young men and women. They should understand about that. They should understand what's going on and why we're making this commitment and the sacrifices that are being ... I will say that the treatment of our soldiers and Marines and airmen and sailors has been tremendous by the people of the United States, whether they

agree with the war or disagree with the war. And I think that's a lesson we all learned from Vietnam. And I appreciate that so much. It's made a huge difference for our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines.

MR HENDREN: You've come with a different mission than General Petraeus had. Do you also come with a different style?

GEN ODIERNO: I think new commanders, we all have different personalities. We all have grown up differently. What I would say is General Petraeus and I, we jointly went through this, the surge. I was the Corps commander and he was the force commander. We talked all the time. We have a very close relationship. I think we think a lot alike. I think we do things maybe a little bit differently. But, again, that's more personal [unintelligible].

MR HENDREN: You were telling me a little bit earlier about when it was that you realized that you might be coming back. Tell me about it.

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I was...I actually had just gotten back and I was actually at my mother-in-law's house and she came in—I was ... I don't know what I was doing, I guess eating breakfast or something. And she came and said, "Do you know this Admiral Fallon? I understand he

just resigned.” And at that time I knew that there could be a change in where I was going. In fact, that’s when I [unintelligible].

MR HENDREN: You’d only been gone for six months. I’m sure you would have liked to have been gone a little bit longer. What changes have you seen in that amount of time?

GEN ODIERNO: Actually fairly significant. It was six months [unintelligible]. What happened was is the operations that occurred down in Southern Iraq, again, Basra and here in Sadr City. And what’s happened is I see a completely different environment as it pertains to Jaish al-Mahdi both down south and in Baghdad. And it’s made a significant difference.

I believe Jaish al-Mahdi is interested now in reconciling with the Government of Iraq. That was not the case earlier. So I think we have an opportunity here. I think the violence and the people in Southern Iraq feel much better about themselves now that the militias, for the most part, are gone. [Unintelligible – background noise].

MR HENDREN: What about Iran’s involvement? We’ve heard reports that some of these special groups are now going back to Iran for training and are

coming back here and that they may be responsible for some of the trouble.

GEN ODIERNO: Well, Iran continues to meddle inside of Iraq. Clearly they have a tremendous information campaign going on against the strategic agreement between the United States and Iraq. They're openly criticizing it. So they want to influence the outcome of that.

We continue to see some lethal aid. We're still discovering Iranian-made weapons and munitions that are still inside of Iraq. Although it's a bit less, we're still discovering it.

And thirdly, we do believe they're starting to change their tactics a little bit. We believe they are starting to train some of these special groups who have broken off from Jaish al-Mahdi once they've started to reconcile, and we believe they're forming [unintelligible]-like organizations that they want to insert into Iraq for a long term potential to create instability. So clearly they still are active here in Iraq. We would much rather see them act in a much more positive way through economic development, technological development, and have them fully focus on that. That would be a much better way for them to act.

MR HENDREN: Are they a threat to the stability of Iraq?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I think they are. I mean, I think they could be a positive force if they choose to be. But right now, for the most part, they, in my mind, are creating more instability in Iraq.

MR HENDREN: With the knowledge of the Iranian government?

GEN ODIERNO: I would just say the Quds Force is the one that's running the operations here. People have differing opinions on what the relationship is with the government. But I would say the Quds Force is clearly involved in what's going on here in Iraq.

MR HENDREN: How we doing on time?

UNKNOWN: Good.

MR HENDREN: Is there anything in addition that you think we ought to be talking about? While you think of that, I do want to press you just a little bit more on, you know, the future troop setup. I know you were an, if not the original proponent of the surge which suggests to me a conservative mindset about ensuring we have enough troops to deal with any eventuality. There's another school of thought, as you

know, that the best thing we could do is set a timetable to draw down. Can you just give me some insight into your thinking on that? And how—.

GEN ODIERNO: I would just say that, first off, I do believe in conditions-based. However, conditions-based does not mean I want more troops here for a long period of time. What that means is we want to base it on the conditions. We don't want to lose the gains that we've had. And if we did it too quickly, we could. So, again, it's about risk. So it's about redefining the risks.

I would like to reduce the size of our force here as quickly as possible. I think there is some potential for that if we continue to see the progress that we're seeing. And we will recommend that at the right time. But it's got to be...we've got to make sure we don't step backwards and lose the progress that we've made so far. And that's my [unintelligible].

MR HENDREN: Is it within the realm of possibility to cut troops by as much as 50,000 in a year?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I mean again, I would just say that we'll work through that as we move forward. I'm not prepared to comment [unintelligible].

MR HENDREN: Anything I'm missing? Let me just look through my cheat sheet. Let me ask you a little about the capabilities of the ISF. You've seen them develop and [unintelligible] 2004. They were really a mess. They still have significant problems. How is, you know, the sectarianism, and what's the status of their troops?

GEN ODIERNO: First, the Iraqi Army has continued to develop at a very good pace. They are now conducting almost all the operations, either independently or jointly with us, mostly independently. They're taking the lead in many more areas. I would say they probably have the lead in about 70% of the country now and I expect that to continue to go up here in the next few months. So I mean, I think their capability has improved significantly.

We've seen a huge difference in the National Police, once accused of sectarian operations back in 2005, 2006. They have gone through retraining. They have purged themselves of those leaders that led the sectarian operations. They have continued to work. We're finding them now as a very capable force.

The Iraqi police, in pockets, very, very good. In pockets, very, very bad. And in pockets, about average. But they are the ones who

probably tend to be more influenced by the local politics. So we're still working very hard with the local police to become more effective. But we have seen signs of improvement there as well.

The problem we still have, it's going to take a few years for the Army to get the enablers they need to be independent. It just has to do with modernization. Artillery systems, helicopters, good, solid maintenance systems, those are the kind of things that will take a few more years. It will take a few more years to develop the Navy so they can protect their own oil platforms. It's going to take a few more years for them to develop an Air Force. But they're on the way to do that, but it's just going to take a little bit of time.

MR HENDREN: I've read in the paper about the so-called "tough-love program" in Anbar and does that come from you? What's that all about?.

GEN ODIERNO: Again, it's...obviously that's happening across Iraq. What...you know, in Anbar we've made some really great progress. And so what we're trying to do is wean them off of the support that we give them as fast as possible. And so what they're doing out there is they're being successful in what they're doing until now. You can do this. You don't need us to do this. Don't depend on us. And so the tough-love program is about them being more self sufficient.

And I think it's working.

MR HENDREN: Sort of find a way to get gas if you can't get gas.

GEN ODIERNO: Right.

MR HENDREN: Alright, my final question. I know you're looking at your watch [unintelligible]. Of all the things that you talked about – the Iranian threat, the refugees are coming back, some of them already being attacked in isolated incidents, and the Sons of Iraq – there's not one of those that you think is the single greatest threat to security?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I think [laughs] obviously, I would say that the biggest threat is all of those things combined. And if for some reason we started to have significant problems in many different areas. That's what the threat is. Each one individually, you know, I think can be worked very well.

But to be honest with you, there's positive indicators in all of those. The Iraqi's displaced people coming back, for the most part, that's going very well. There are isolated incidents and problems. But we're finding signs in most of Baghdad, which is where most of this is occurring now, where people are acceptive of them coming back.

I think the Iraqis are moving towards reconciliation more—actually the populace is moving more towards reconciliation sometimes than the leaders. And so that gives me confidence as we move forward.

But, again, they will be...there will be some little ups and downs as we go through this process. But the difference today is those ups and downs are much smaller than they were before. And this evolutionary process that we're in now is evolving in the right direction.

MR HENDREN: Thank you. Is there anything I didn't ask you about?

GEN ODIERNO: You asked me about everything [laughs].

MR HENDREN: I did my best.

GEN ODIERNO: You did good.

MR HENDREN: Alright. Thanks a lot.

GEN ODIERNO: Sure. Thank you.